

United States

This country note provides an overview of key characteristics of the education system in the United States based on Education at a Glance 2024. In line with the thematic focus of Education at a Glance 2024, it highlights issues of equity in education. Data in this note are provided for the latest available year as indicated in Education at a Glance 2024.

Highlights

- A very large majority of young adults have obtained an upper secondary qualification in the United States. Only 6% of 25-34 year-olds did not have an upper secondary educational attainment in 2023, 8 percentage points below the OECD average. Moreover, this share decreased by 3 percentage points between 2016 and 2023.
- The share of 18-24 year-olds who are not in education, employment, or training was 14.1% in 2023, slightly higher than the OECD average of 13.7%. Around two-thirds of this group was inactive, whereas one-third was unemployed.
- Foreign-born 25-64 year-olds in the United States are more likely to be employed than native-born adults across all levels of educational attainment except tertiary. For example, foreign-born adults with less than upper secondary educational attainment have an employment rate of 68%, higher than the OECD average of 63%, while native-born adults with the same level of education have an employment rate of 46%, lower than the OECD average of 60%.
- Successful completion of tertiary education is often linked to students' family background. In the United States, 82% of first-generation immigrant students who started a tertiary programme in 2012 had successfully completed their studies by 2017, two years after the theoretical end of their programmes. This is 5 percentage points higher than the completion rate of non-immigrant students and 21 percentage points higher than the average of OECD countries with available data.
- Among students in the United States who started a tertiary programme in 2012 with at least one parent with tertiary attainment, 83% completed their studies by 2017, two years after the theoretical end of the programme, while only 63% of students whose parents had less than upper secondary education did so. These completion rates are higher than the OECD average, but the 20 percentage point gap between parent education attainment groups is larger than that of the OECD average of 14 percentage points.
- The United States invested substantially more per student (USD 20 387) on average across all levels of education compared to the average across OECD countries (USD 14 209) in 2021. However, this amount varies widely across states; in primary and secondary education it ranges from USD 9 991 per student in Idaho to USD 31 366 per student in the District of Columbia.
- Household contributions are high for early childhood education in the United States. They accounted for 19% of expenditure in pre-primary education in 2021 which was 6 percentage points above the OECD average. High costs of early childhood education on households may explain low enrolment at

this level. In the United States, only 61% of 3-5 year-olds were enrolled in pre-primary education in 2022, while the OECD average was 83%.

- In tertiary education, national bachelor's and master's students enrolled in private institutions in the United States have the highest tuition fees on average across OECD countries with available data. In-state national students at public institutions have the second highest fees among OECD countries. However, 80% of students in the United States received aid in the form of public grants, scholarships, or public or government-guaranteed private loans for the 2019-20 school year, the fourth-highest share among OECD countries with available data.
- In 2021, working time required at school for teachers in United States public institutions was 1 453 hours per year on average at the lower secondary level, 24% more than the average of 1 174 hours for OECD countries with available data.
- Average actual salaries for lower secondary teachers in the United States are only slightly more than half the salary of an equivalent full-time similarly educated worker. This ratio for the United States is the second lowest among 16 OECD countries for which data is available.

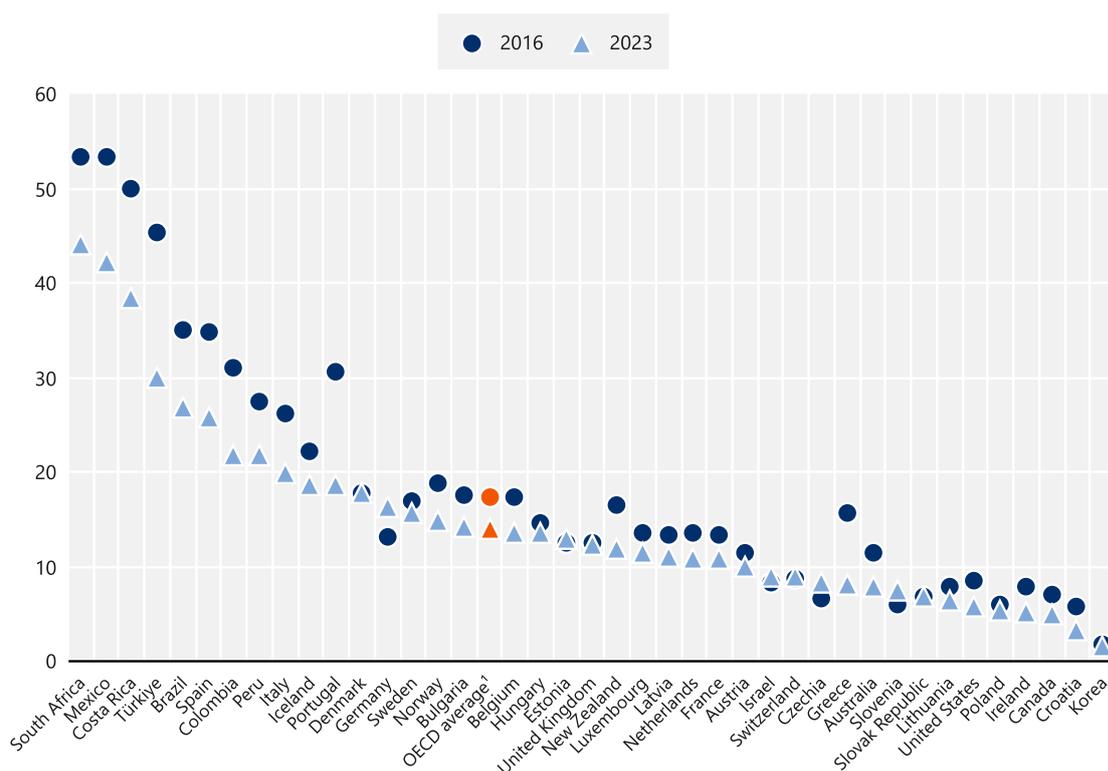
The output of educational institutions and the impact of learning

- Adults without upper secondary qualification are at considerable risk of poor social and labour-market outcomes throughout their lives. Reducing the share of young adults without an upper secondary qualification has been a priority in many countries and their share has decreased between 2016 and 2023 in 28 out of 35 OECD member countries. This is also the case in the United States. Their share of 25-34 year-olds without upper secondary educational attainment decreased by 3 percentage points between 2016 and 2023. At 6%, it is 8 percentage points below the OECD average in 2023 (Figure 1).
- The difficult labour-market situation faced by workers without an upper secondary qualification is reflected in employment rates among 25-34 year-olds. In the United States, 60% of 25-34 year-olds without an upper secondary qualification are employed, compared to 75% of those with an upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary qualification. The corresponding OECD averages are 61% and 79%, respectively. Moreover, workers without an upper secondary qualification are at risk of earning very low wages in most OECD countries. In the United States, 42% of 25-64 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment earn at or below half the median income compared to 25% of workers with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary educational attainment and 12% of workers with a tertiary qualification. Across the OECD, the respective shares are 28%, 17% and 10%.
- Strong labour markets and increasing participation in education have led to a decline in the share of 18-24 year-olds who are neither in employment nor in education or training (NEET) in most OECD member countries. Across the OECD, the average NEET rate decreased from 15.8% to 13.8% between 2016 and 2023. In the United States, the share of NEETs decreased from 15.3% to 14.1%.
- By almost all available measures, women are more likely to have better educational outcomes than men, and in many cases the gap is widening. For instance, this is reflected in gender gaps in educational attainment. In all OECD member countries, women aged 25-34 are as likely or more likely than their male peers to have a tertiary qualification (54% compared to 41% on average across OECD countries). With a tertiary educational attainment rate of 57% for women and 47% for men, the gap is similar to the OECD average in the United States.
- Although women are more likely to outperform men in education-related outcomes, the picture is reversed when they enter the labour market; the key measures of labour-market outcomes are generally worse for women than for men. Women aged 25-34 are less likely to be employed than men,

with the gap typically widest for those with below upper secondary educational attainment and narrowest for those with tertiary attainment. In the United States, only 42% of young women with educational attainment below upper secondary educational level are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 73% (the corresponding OECD averages are 47% and 72%). In contrast, 84% of young women with a tertiary qualification are employed, while the corresponding share for young men is 89% (the corresponding OECD averages are 84% and 90%). Tertiary attainment also does not help to reduce the wage gap between men and women. Across the OECD, young women with a tertiary qualification earn on average 83% of the wage of their male peers, while the corresponding share is 82% in the United States. Among those with upper secondary or post-secondary non-tertiary attainment, young women earn on average 84% of the wage of their male peers across the OECD and 81% in the United States.

Figure 1. Trends in the share of 25–34 year-olds with below upper secondary educational attainment (2016 and 2023)

In per cent



1. The OECD average is derived from the unweighted mean of all countries with available and comparable data for both years.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the share of 25–34 year-olds with below upper secondary attainment in 2023.

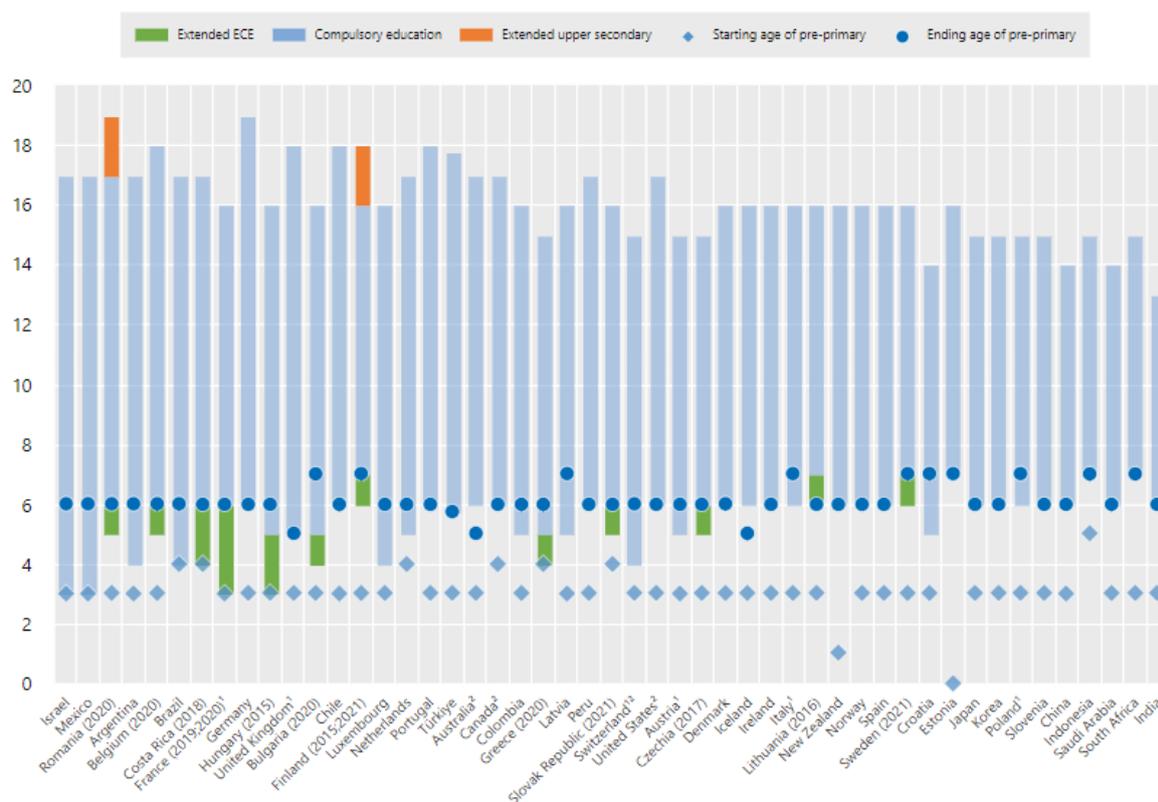
Source: OECD (2024), Table A1.2. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

Access to education, participation and progression

- Childcare and parental leave policies vary considerably between countries. Of particular importance for low-income families is the so-called childcare gap, the period between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free early childhood education and care or compulsory education. In eight OECD countries, there is no childcare gap as free early childhood education or compulsory education starts immediately following the end of paid parental leave. In contrast, the United States has an above average childcare gap of 5 years between the end of paid parental leave and the start of free early childhood education.
- Early childhood education can help reduce the developmental gaps that put some children at a disadvantage when they enrol in primary school. In most OECD countries, 83% of children aged 3 to 5 are enrolled in pre-primary education, while in the United States, 61% of 3–5 year-olds are enrolled.
- Twelve OECD member and accession countries have increased the duration of compulsory education over the past decade. The duration of compulsory education in the United States (11 years, from ages 6 to 16) did not increase during this time period. This duration is identical to the OECD average (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Duration of compulsory education (2022)

In years



Note: The year in parentheses indicates when policy changes were made to the duration of compulsory education. In addition, extended ECEC/extended upper secondary refers to the extension in the duration of the relevant level since 2013.

1. There are other compulsory activities to complete by the end of compulsory education (see Table B2.1).

Countries are ranked in descending order of the duration of compulsory education.

Source: OECD (2024), Table B2.1. For more information see Education at a Glance 2004 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- Grade repetition is common in many countries to give students more time to master the content of a grade, although its effectiveness is debated. In the United States, 1.7% of primary, 1.8% of lower secondary and 3.1% of general upper secondary students repeat a grade in their current level of education, while the OECD averages are 1.5% for primary, 2.2% for lower secondary and 3.2% for general upper secondary education, respectively.
- The likelihood of tertiary students successfully completing their studies is often impacted by their family background. In the United States, 83% of students with at least one parent with tertiary attainment successfully completed their tertiary studies within two years of the theoretical end of the programme in 2017, while only 63% of students whose parents had less than upper secondary education did so.
- In most OECD countries, a large majority of 15–19 year-olds are still enrolled in education, even though compulsory education usually ends before the age of 19. However, in most countries there are large differences in enrolment rates between sub-national regions. In the United States, 87% of 15–19 year-olds are enrolled at national level, whereas in the region with the lowest enrolment rate, Alaska, only 80% of this age group are enrolled.
- Many countries seek to attract internationally mobile tertiary students, as they often pay higher tuition fees and, if they decide to stay in the country after graduation, bring valuable skills to the labour market. Across the OECD, a total of 6% of all tertiary students are internationally mobile in 2022. In the United States, the share of foreign students within tertiary education is 5%, up from 4% in 2013.

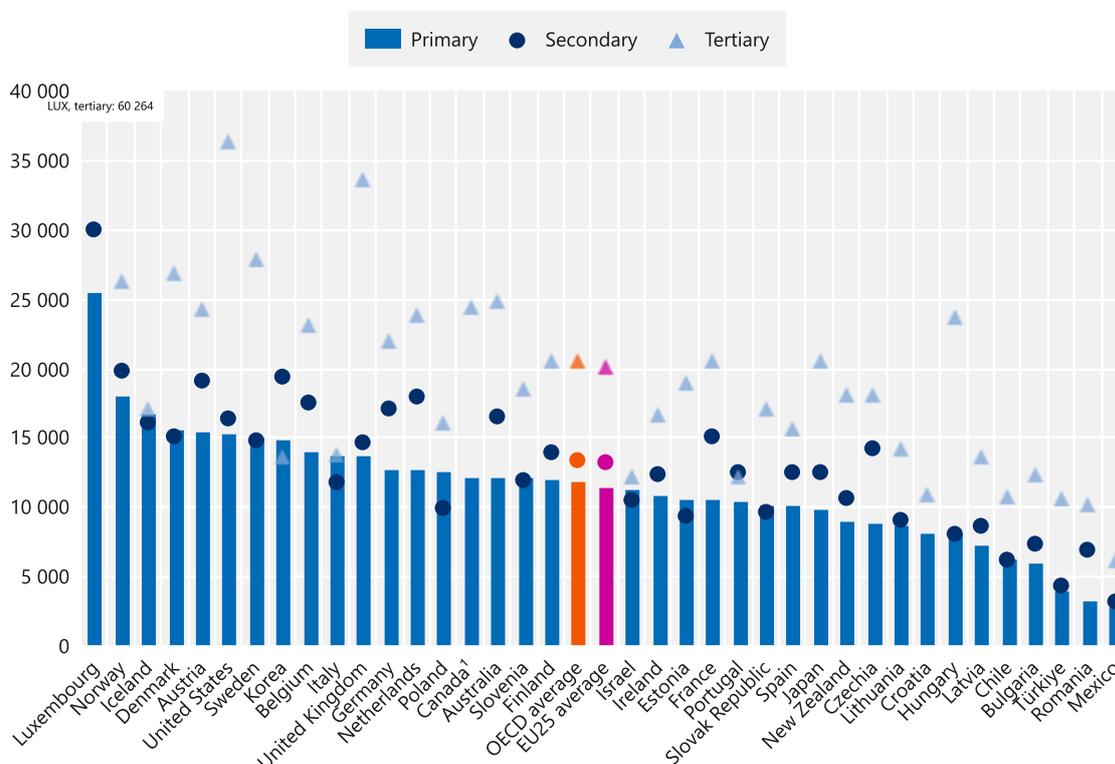
Financial resources invested in education

- The average annual expenditure per full-time equivalent student from primary to tertiary education (including R&D) in the United States is USD 20 387 compared to an average of USD 14 209 in OECD countries. In most countries, expenditure increases by level of education. In the United States, spending per full-time equivalent student is USD 15 270 in primary education, USD 16 301 in secondary education and USD 36 274 in tertiary education (Figure 3).¹
- In 2021, OECD countries spent on average 4.9% of their gross domestic product (GDP) on educational institutions at the primary level, remaining broadly stable since 2015. However, spending levels and trends vary considerably between countries. The United States spent 5.8% of GDP in 2021, also remaining broadly stable since 2015.
- Across the OECD, public authorities are responsible for the vast majority of spending on education, particularly at compulsory levels. In the United States, 93% of total expenditure on primary institutions comes from public sources, which is equal to the OECD average of 93%. Private expenditure makes up a greater share in pre-primary and tertiary education in many countries. In the United States, the share of public expenditure on pre-primary education is 81%, below the OECD average of 86%, while for tertiary education it is 39%, compared to an OECD average of 68%.

¹ All expenditure figures in this note are expressed in USD calculated based on purchasing power parity (PPP) exchange rates.

Figure 3. Total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary, secondary and tertiary education (2021)

In equivalent USD converted using PPPs, expenditure on educational institutions



1. Primary education includes pre-primary and lower secondary programmes.

Countries are ranked in descending order of the total expenditure per full-time equivalent student in primary education.

Source: OECD (2024), Table C1.1. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

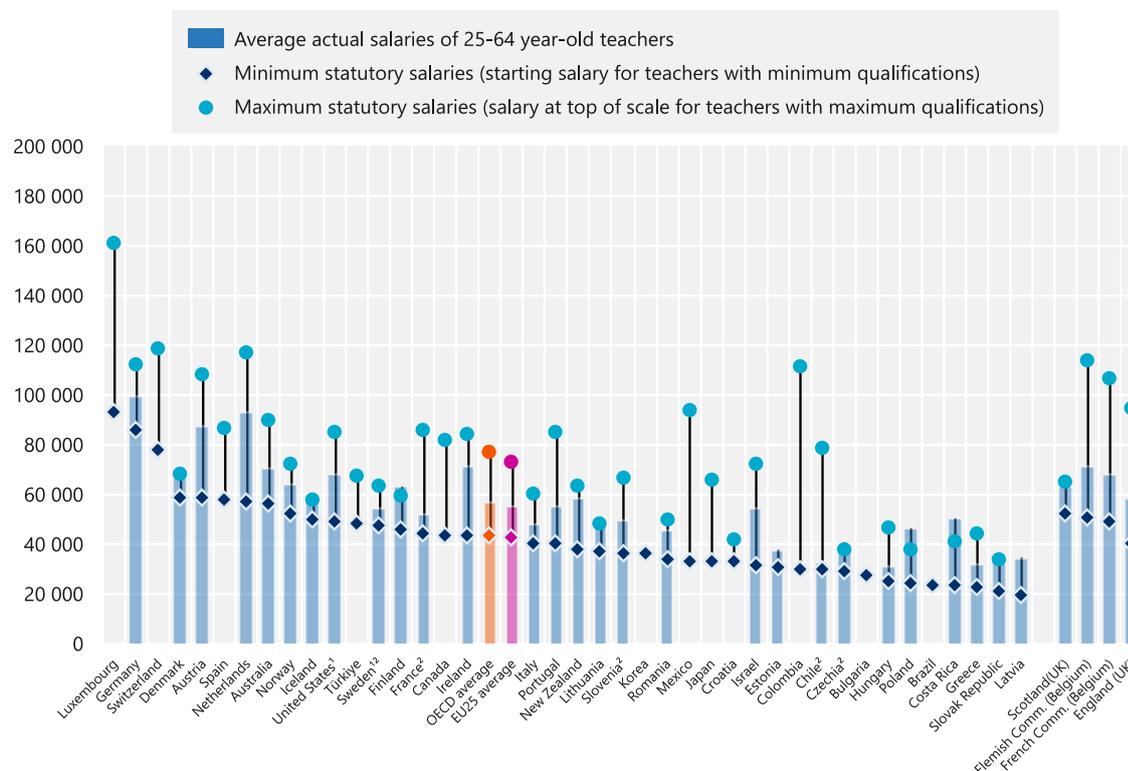
- How private institutions are funded varies considerably across countries, with some fully or largely government funded, while others receive little or no public funding. In the United States, government sources spend USD 15 603 per full-time equivalent student in public primary institutions, while the figure is USD 1 458 per full-time equivalent student in private ones (the OECD averages are USD 11 914 for public primary institutions and USD 7 867 for private ones).
- Tuition fees are an important component of private expenditure on tertiary education, but they vary considerably across countries. In the United States, bachelor's level tuition fees are on average USD 9 596 per year. This is the upper end of the range among OECD countries for which data are available.
- The distribution of government expenditure on education by level of government differs between countries. In some countries, all final expenditure on education comes from central governments, whereas in other countries all final expenditure comes from local or regional governments. In the United States, the central (federal) government is responsible for 0% of final expenditure on primary education, the regional (state) governments are responsible for 2%, and local governments are responsible for 98%.

Teachers, the learning environment, and the organisation of schools

- Across the OECD, 18 out of 21 countries with available data on secondary education report that they face shortages of fully qualified teachers at the start of academic year 2022/2023. Teacher shortages in the United States are defined as having one or more vacancies not filled by fully qualified teachers at the beginning of the academic year. The United States reported that teacher shortages exist across all levels of education for all subjects.
- The share of teachers in pre-primary, primary, and secondary education leaving the profession varies considerably across countries. Among countries with available data, between 2% and 12% of teachers leave the profession each year. In the United States, the share is in the middle of this range with 5%.
- In 2023, average actual salaries of lower secondary teachers aged 25-64 in the United States reached USD 68 324 (compared to USD 56 462 on average across OECD countries), 40% higher than the minimum statutory salary (starting salary with minimum qualifications) of USD 48 899. The difference between actual salaries and the minimum statutory salaries results partly from the structure of the teacher population (by qualification and experience), but also from the amount of additional work-related payments (bonuses and allowances for performing certain tasks) (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Lower secondary teachers' average actual salaries compared to the statutory minimum and maximum salaries (2023)

Annual salaries of teachers in public institutions, in equivalent USD converted using PPPs for private consumption



Note: Actual salaries include bonuses and allowances.

1. Actual salaries for minimum and maximum statutory salaries.

2. Year of reference for actual salaries differs from 2023. Refer to the source table for more information.

Countries and other participants are ranked in descending order of the starting salaries for teachers with the minimum qualifications.

Source: OECD (2024), Table D3.3 and the OECD Data Explorer, <https://data-explorer.oecd.org/>. For more information see *Education at a Glance 2024 Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

- Contractual or collective agreements often outline a required amount of working time for teachers to spend at school. In 2021, lower secondary level teachers in United States public institutions were required to spend on average 1 453 working hours per year at school, 24% more than the average of 1 174 hours for OECD countries with available data.
- Countries operate varying sizes of schools. In the United States, the median primary school has 67 students per grade compared to the OECD average of 27. The largest 5% of primary schools in the United States have 145 or more students per grade, while the OECD average is 91 or more. At the other end of the scale, the smallest 5% of primary schools in the United States have 16 or fewer students per grade compared to an OECD average of 5 or fewer students per grade. Although small schools are important for ensuring primary education is accessible, especially in sparsely populated rural areas, they can be costly to run and may have to resort to multi-grade teaching.
- Most education systems involve students and parents in the governance of public schools. In most countries, it is compulsory for parents' representatives to be included in the governing board of public schools. Student participation is less widespread, but still common. In the United States, governing boards may exist, but they are not required in public schools.
- Between 2013 and 2022, the average age of teachers increased across the OECD. In lower secondary education, 36% of teachers were 50 years or older in 2022, compared to 35% in 2013. The United States has fewer teachers aged 50 or older, with only 31% of teachers in this age category in 2022, up from 30% in 2013.

More information

For more information on Education at a Glance 2024 and to access the full set of indicators, see: <https://doi.org/10.1787/c00cad36-en>.

For more information on the methodology used during the data collection for each indicator, the references to the sources and the specific notes for each country, see Education at a Glance 2024: Sources, Methodologies and Technical Notes (<https://doi.org/10.1787/e7d20315-en>).

For general information on the methodology, please refer to the *OECD Handbook for Internationally Comparative Education Statistics 2018* (<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264304444-en>).

Updated data can be found online at <http://data-explorer.oecd.org/s/5q> and by following the *StatLinks*  in the publication.

Explore, compare and visualise more data and analysis using the Education GPS: <https://gpseducation.oecd.org/>.

Questions can be directed to the Education at a Glance team at the OECD Directorate for Education and Skills: EDU.EAG@oecd.org.

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